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Speaker Cannon's Opening Day Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Welcome back. I'm very glad that you have all returned safely to Tallahassee, and I hope you are ready to begin the work of Session. I'd like to extend greetings to the special guests who were recognized earlier. Thank you for joining us here in the Florida House for the Opening Day of the 2012 Regular Session. We appreciate very much the friendship you have shown to this institution.

Most of all, though, I want to thank our families, our spouses, our children, our parents, our siblings and all the people who, through their love, support, graciousness, and forbearance, make it possible for all of us to have the privilege of serving in the Florida House of Representatives. Members please rise and join me in thanking your family and all the families of the Florida House.

Members, after the adjournment of this session, we will reconvene shortly in Joint Session to hear from our Governor, Rick Scott. During the course of my tenure in office, I have found myself repeatedly reminding people that the role of the Speaker of the House is not the same, in fact it is very different, than the role of the Governor; a fact that I am especially grateful for today. This morning, I am quite content to leave the major speechmaking, the articulation of the state-of-the-state and the vision for our future in the capable hands of our Governor.

We are fortunate to have his principle-centered leadership, and I look forward to hearing what he has to say this morning.

But I, on the other hand, wanted to take a few minutes to do what I believe is the proper role for a Speaker, which is to share what you can expect from this Session, in this House.

As with last year, this House will conduct itself in a disciplined, respectful, and transparent manner. We will abide by our rules, and we will respect our committee process. I will do my best to communicate clearly, and strive always to mean what I say and say what I mean.

It has been, and will continue to be, my policy not to publicly comment on your Member bills. Committee chairs and subcommittee chairs will continue to have latitude in deciding whether to agenda bills. A bi-cameral Legislature is a collaborative process and no individual opinion, not even mine, should be dispositive on matters of public policy.

As you consider your own individual votes this Session, let me suggest that why you vote may be as important as how you vote. It is no great political insight to observe that in this election year a strong undercurrent of frustration and cynicism pervades the American body politic. The pundits blame the politicians. The politicians blame the media. The Left blames the Right. The Right blames the advocates. The advocates blame the activists.

And amid that chaos, what gets lost is this – the fact that we spend so much time talking about who is to blame is the very thing that drives the public's frustration and cynicism.

There is a growing sense that our political discourse has become pre-textual; a fear that the politics of personal interest have become more important than public policy; that our decision-making is driven entirely by avarice and ambition, by ego and emotion.

And, if we are honest with ourselves, those fears are not irrational, or unfounded. After all, politics is nothing more or less than human behavior amplified, and the defining trait of human history has always been the struggle to balance our noble and our selfish impulses. The danger comes when we allow that balance to be overwhelmed by a kind of political relativism that justifies our whims to the detriment of our obligations.

No group of leaders ever understood this danger better than our Founding Fathers. The genius of the Founders did not lie in their grasp of political or institutional theory, but in their exquisite understanding of human nature. They had seen in the monarchies of Europe the dangers of merging political power and personal desire, and so they crafted a written constitution based on notions of limited government, fundamental rights, and the separation of powers. They understood that in order to protect freedom, the Rule of Law must always trump the laws of the rulers.

A constitution, whether it's the Federal Constitution or our Florida Constitution is not a collection of abstract principles, it is instead a road map, a precise compass, to help those of us temporarily entrusted with political power to follow our true north. And so as we approach this Session, it would be my suggestion that we turn first to our Florida Constitution for guidance and direction.

Each year that we convene, the Legislature has one primary responsibility – to pass a balanced budget for the State of Florida. Balancing a budget is easy enough to say, but as the failure in Washington D.C. attests, not as easy to do. This will be the sixth straight fiscal year in which our revenues fall short of our projected obligations. And that means we will be required to, once again, make hard decisions; to differentiate our wants from our needs and our needs from our priorities.

Our prior insistence on fiscal discipline has paid great dividends. Although Florida was one of the state's hardest hit by the national recession, we have avoided the kinds of financial crises that paralyzed governments in other states. We restored stability to our bond rating, and we created a steady, predictable climate for Florida's businesses and Florida's families.

It is my intention that this House work with our colleagues in the Senate to complete the budget during the scheduled 60 days of regular Session. I have tremendous confidence in Chairman Grimsley, and I know that she, working with all of her subcommittee chairs, will bring the appropriations process to a timely and responsible conclusion.

In most years, passing a balanced budget is our one true constitutional obligation. However, once every ten years, the Legislature is required to reapportion voters into state legislative and congressional districts. We have spent the last half year engaged in a continuous redistricting process, and we have gone to extraordinary lengths to make that process open, transparent and

accessible. By any and every conceivable metric, we are light years beyond what has ever been done in any previous redistricting process.

But then this redistricting session is unlike any before because of the standards added to the constitution by Amendments 5 and 6. It is no secret that I was not a supporter of those amendments. But, that became irrelevant on Election Day. Once the voters approved those amendments, they became a part of our constitution, and, as such, we have a legal and moral obligation to follow the letter of the law and we will.

Chairman Weatherford has done an exceptional job navigating uncharted waters while performing an arduous, thankless task. Working with the subcommittee co-chairs and vice chairs, he has crafted state House and Congressional maps that are compact, that protect the rights of minorities to elect candidates of their choice, and that respect political and geographical boundaries. As a consequence of complying with the constitution, the House maps may well inconvenience, frustrate, or, perhaps, even end the political ambitions of good, hardworking, conscientious Members. Unfortunately, here, more than anywhere else, the conflict exists between the politics of personal interest and the rule of law.

If our Founding Fathers understood that the rule of law was necessary to ensure that government did not simply become the vehicle for personal agendas, they also understood that adherence to that rule of law would take more than an honor system. And so they introduced the doctrines of separation of powers and checks and balances.

Sometimes the constitution's checks and balances require the Legislature to act to curb the excesses and errors of other branches of government. Other times, however, we are not the heroes of the story because it is the Legislature that has failed to get it right.

And that brings me to my final topic – reform of our Higher Education System. Florida once had a public higher education system built on the 2+2 model with an overriding goal of providing access to higher education. Twenty years later, after a steady stream of reform proposals, several originating from this House, we have a higher education system with no clear mission, universities pursuing overlapping agendas despite limited public resources, and our community colleges rapidly transforming themselves into 4 year degree institutions. We have a Board of Governors unsure of how to exercise its authority or execute its mission. And we, as a Legislature, and I freely include myself in this critique, have contributed to the problem by parochially advancing the interests of our local university or college at the expense of the system as a whole. If left unchecked, we will continue to have a higher education system that is aggressively racing to the middle.

I am not standing before you today to tell you that I know the solution to the problem. In fact, the Florida Constitution makes it clear that it is not the role of the Florida Legislature to dictate the mission of the State University System; that role is reserved by the constitution for the Board of Governors. And while this may not have been the system I would design, if we are going to have a successful higher education system, we need to stop playing musical chairs with the governance structure and focus on implementing a modern, coordinated system for the State of Florida.

Since we have contributed to the muddying of the waters, it is my hope that the Florida House can play a constructive role in clarifying them. To that end, I have tasked the House Education

Committee to engage our university presidents and the members of the Board of Governors in a dialogue about the future of our system. This Friday, the presidents of the University of Florida and Florida State University will meet with the Education Committee. During week two of Session, the committee will visit with the remaining nine presidents over the course of three separate committee meetings. The purpose of these conversations is to help solve a problem of vital importance for the future prosperity of our State. So I would ask our Members that you approach these conversations with open ears and open minds.

We have not started down this path with a predetermined outcome in mind, and these discussions may or may not result in legislation. But the time feels right to have this conversation, in no small part because this is our chamber's last opportunity to draw on the wisdom and experience of Dr. Bill Proctor before he is termed out of office. Dr. Proctor was a leader in this state on higher education issues before I was born. He is, along with our beaches, our sunshine, and the Everglades, one of Florida's precious natural resources, and I can think of no better person to help us chart a path to success than Chairman Proctor.

Our State has reached a moment in our history where we must find new pathways for success. The undeniable fact is that the stability and diversity of our state's economy are inextricably linked to the maintenance of a strong and dynamic system of higher education. We must ensure that Floridians are provided with the tools they need to compete in the global economy.

I've often said that government can't create jobs. But we can promote public policies that create the stability, the confidence, and the opportunities necessary for private sector job creation to occur.

I know that all of you share this goal. And I know it is a goal that is shared by our partners in the Florida Senate, and by our Governor. While we may have different ideas or approaches on how to best address the challenges facing Florida, I believe we are more similar than different. We want to see Florida's unemployment rate continue to drop as jobs return to the private sector. We want to continue to reduce the burden of government on Florida's families and businesses. And we want to promote a vibrant, diverse K-20 education system.

When our Founding Fathers envisioned a system with defined responsibilities and constraints for each branch of government and a bi-cameral Legislature, they did so to foster discussion and debate. This constant conversation effectively limits the power of any individual elected official. Thankfully, Members, it does not reduce the possibilities of what we can imagine or what we can accomplish when we work to support our mutual priorities.

With the constitution as our guide and our commitment to the future of our state as our mission, we will achieve extraordinary things for the people of Florida.

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of serving as your Speaker. God Bless all of you and God Bless the great state of Florida.

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